

COUNTRY PRACTICE IN DAYS GONE BY

(as recorded in contemporary diaries)

PART I

by

WILLIAM BROCKBANK

THERE can be no better way of learning about doctors, patients and the sick room than by reading contemporary diaries, particularly those kept by country parsons. It is extremely rare to find one written by a general practitioner describing his daily life, the patients he visits, their ailments. One of these—the diary of John Symcotts—has already been published under the editorship of F. N. L. Poynter and W. J. Bishop.¹ Extracts from another—the diary of Richard Kay of Baldingstone, Bury, Surgeon (1737–50)—has been published by W. Brockbank and M. L. Kay.²

It is intended to reprint in this series extracts from six diaries in their date order, beginning with the earliest.

I. THE MEMOIRS OF THE VERNEY FAMILY*

These memoirs were written by two holders of the title Lady Verney towards the end of the last century.^{3,4} The documents on which they are based covered the period between the Civil War and the reign of William and Mary, the years being 1645 to 1696 and the locality Buckinghamshire. They tell of drugs, diseases and methods of treatment. The family doctor hardly appears.

1640 There is a tremendous bill from 'the poticary' for pills and potions, boluses, plaisters, 'snail waters', etc. 'for Mistresse Penelope' enough to kill the girl. The physic of the day was of a murderous description; bleedings, caustics, setons, cuppings, abound in all possible states of health.

1641 The danger from small-pox is terrible. Sir Henry had died of it two years before and Nan is taken ill in 1641. Lady Sussex writes to Ralph in much concern: 'Nan i hope is past the worst, and the till me the think, she will not have much disfiger, i pray God, keep us all from it, for it tis a grivous disise and oncomfortable.'

1651 From Venice Sir Ralph sends Mrs. Isham the famous Venetian drug for her family medicine chest. 'I see by your sending of me Venice trekle', she writes, 'as you thinke I stell deale in phisicke, but my traviles hath binne so a boutte in Inghlande, as I have almost forgote all phisicke'. 'Hee that is most famous for treacle', Sir Ralph notes, 'is called Sigr. Antonio Sgobis, and keepest shopp on the right hand going towards St. Mark's. His price is 19 livres (Venize money) a pound, and hee gives leaden potts with the Ostridge signe uppon them, and papers both in Italian and Lattin to show its virtue.' This celebrated and incredibly nasty compound, traditionally composed by Nero's physician, was made of vipers, white wine, and opium, 'spices from both the Indies', liquorice, red roses, tops of germander, juice of rough sloes, seeds of treacle mustard, tops of St. John's wort, and some twenty other herbs, to be mixed with honey 'triple the weight of all the dry species' into an electuary. The recipe is given as late as 1739 in Dr. Quincy's *English Dispensatory* published by Thomas Longman at the Ship in Paternoster Row. Vipers are essential, and to get the full benefit of them 'a dozen vipers,

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should be put alive into white wine.' The English doctor, anxious for the credit of British vipers, proves that Venice treacle may be made as well in England, 'though their country is hotter, and so may the more rarify the viperine juices; . . . yet the bites of our vipers at the proper time of the year, which is the hottest, are as efficacious and deadly as theirs.' But he complains that the name of Venice goes so far, that English people 'please themselves much with buying a tin pot, at a low price of a dirty sailor . . . with directions in the Italian tongue, printed in London', and that some base druggists 'make this wretched stuff of little else than the sweepings of their shops.' Sir Ralph could pride himself that his leaden pots contained the genuine horror. It was used as 'an opiate when some stimulus is required at the same time'; an overdose was confessedly dangerous, and even its advocates allowed that Venice treacle did not suit everyone, because forsooth 'honey disagrees with some particular constitutions'.

The next passage of interest concerns the treatment of sixteen-year-old Edmund Verney for scoliosis at the clinic of Nicolas and Peter Schot in Utrecht already published.⁵

There is an amusing account of The King's Evil.

1650 Little Mary was a sensitive and delicate child, suspected of having the king's evil. The lawful sovereign of England was a wanderer and an exile, and, even if he could be approached, they doubted whether his touch would have its full virtue, as he was not a duly anointed king. In these delicate circumstances so ardent a Royalist as Mrs. Sherard resolved to send Mary to be 'touched' by the young Louis XIV.

Mrs. Sherard is anxious that her girls should be with Sir Ralph but she hopes 'as Lewcy will wach the thirst oppertewnitey for to have Mary touched, Luce hears that the young French king is not yet "consecrated as they call it"', so she is doubtful whether his touch will be effectual after all and 'the French say that there is noe other cerimoney then for the scicke to passes by the king, and he toucheth the wound and saith, I touch and God healeth'.

Mary was finally touched by Charles II.

1655 (A member of the family has) 'a tertian ague and a fever treated with a vomitt, glister, a cordiall and "breathed a vane"' (an old term for blood-letting).

1656 Sir Ralph took his decimation sadly to heart, and he was troubled by an eruption on his leg and thigh which would not heal. He was deluged with advice by his lady friends. Doll wished him to drink asses' milk while he sat in a bath of it up to the neck, for two hours twice a day; a less tedious remedy is a lotion 'so violant a drop would fech of the skin when it touched'; and a dreadful old woman is recommended who has an infallible 'oyntment for yumurs'.

1657 Edmund had been 'in the hands of Mr. Wiseman, the Surgeon'. 'Truly I might compare my afflictions to Job's,' he wrote to his father, 'I have taken purges and vomits, pills and potions, I have been blooded, and I doe not know what I have not had, I have had so many things.'

1656 There had been a sad outbreak of small-pox there. Cary had sent a note to a neighbour's house not knowing they had it, and the coachman brought back the infection. All the children and step-children sickened 'of this disease, as loathsome as dangerous'—'we were all one among another, bot what fled'. The little ones should have been sent out of the house, but Cary's maid was away on a holiday and 'infints are not essely disposed on'. Cary 'never went to bed in seven nights together besides many halfe nights'; she kept up while the children were in danger and then broke down utterly, whether 'from long woching', as the Doctor said, or from a 'sorfet of eating pigg', as she herself surmised.

Peg Gardiner narrowly escaped total blindness and was 'much worne out', she 'is to keep on a mask and searcloths this winter'. Ursula, who refused to do the same, is deeply pitted. Cary hopes to be free from infection by Christmas 'set the norsary aside, ther is no danger, I have ared all plasis so well'. But prudence was thrown to the winds and the house filled with guests on the happy occasion of the wedding of a step-daughter in November. Ursula, with her deeply scarred face, and Peg with her mask and searcloth, were not very eligible as bridesmaids.

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1665 Aunt Isham 'has also a cure for the falling sickness given her by Lady Shinjane as a thing as never failed. Take the misseltoe which grows sometimes upon the top, and sometimes among the branches of an old oake tree, dry it and beat it to powder and give as much of it as will lye upon a sixpence, 3 mornings together.'

Cary Gardiner has her nostrum, 'a blak meddicin' so potent she would certainly cure the plague could she get enough of it. The official remedy is garlic with butter and a clove or two; and for 'the richer sort', the Coll: of Physicians prescribe a costly connocion of 'Powder of hartshorn, pearls, coral, tormentil, hyacinth-stone, onyx-stone and East Hunicorn's horn'.

1686 June 15 'Child,—I would have answered yours with my own hand, but that it shakes by reason of sickness that seized upon me last weeke. I refused to be lett blood because its observed those that are lett blood here of pestilentiall fevers, seldom or never are knowne to escape. My Cousin Alexander Denton the Lawyer dyed here last weeke of this feaver, having beene lett blood to a considerable quantity, and was gone in 3 days.'

1686 Sir Ralph was extremely unwell. Dr. Denton is pining 'to let blood under his tongue', which Sir Ralph 'has noe minde to'.

Mun, who is deeply grieved for his brother's loss, is at his wit's end to devise more remedies for Sir Ralph, as 'he hath been blooded, vomited, blistered, cupt and scarifyed, and hath 3 physicians with him, besides apothecary and chirurgien' strange to say, 'hee continues still very weak'. Mun himself takes 'Venice Treacle' every night and many other nasty Apothecarys things.

2. THE DIARY OF GEORGE RIDPATH*

George Ridpath, the son of a Scottish minister, was born about 1717 and educated at Edinburgh University where he seems to have been a scholar of some distinction. He was licensed by the Presbytery of Chirnside in 1740 and two years afterwards was presented to the parish of Stichel in the county of Roxburgh, where he remained until his death in 1772. His diary covers the period 1755 to 1761 and is a delightful record of the time.⁶

His parish work kept him busy, though the population of the parish in 1755 was less than a thousand. But there were always a lot of sick to be visited. Hygiene, as we know it, was non-existent; box beds and unaired rooms took toll of the people in phthisis, while the unenclosed and undrained lands led to a great prevalence of fever and ague. Cancer is not mentioned, but small-pox seems to have been taken for granted, and lucky were the patients who came through it 'unspoilt'. Ridpath was much interested both in the theory and practice of medicine, and, when he was interested in a case, loved to give full particulars of it; in consequence we are frequently faced with a mass of sick-room detail which is not always printable.

1756 Thursday, Aprile 8 Dr. John Miller was here all night, having come to a boy who has been in much distress for several days by a strangulated rupture accompanied with a great swelling of his belly and a total want of the alvine (bowel) discharge. He put him into a semi-capium [?a bath] and gave him 2 or 3 suppositories which brought away what had been left of some clysters. But his case seems almost desperate.

Tuesday, Aprile 13 Dr. Gibson and his grandson called after dinner and I went with them to Baptie's where the poor creature still lives, though there is not the least hope of his recovering. He seems now to be preserved by frequent vomitings, by which he has thrown up at different times more than a dozen of worms. What he throws up has been for some time past fetid. His belly is monstrously swelled, and the rest of his body miserably emaciated.

Friday, April 16 Was at the boy Baptie's burial, who died on Wednesday evening (14th).

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1757 October 21 Saw R. Gotrie in the afternoon, who was very ill of a sore throat. Ordered him to be blooded under the tongue, which was done in the evening. Having fasted almost two days, he fell after the blooding into a deliquium, [swoon] which continued, as I was told, an hour, and made all the people about him think he was gone. Saw him as he was recovering out of it. His throat grew better next morning.

1759 July 24 Read Dr. Home's work (*Medical Facts and Experiments*) to an end. The best thing in it is his account of inoculating for the measles first practised by himself, and so far as he carried his experiments with great success. He does it by the blood imbibed in cotton from slight incisions made amongst the measly eruptions.

The diary contains an account of an infectious illness, probably scarlet fever.

1759 Monday, November 12 (My brother Philip) 'writes also that Nancy Waite was threatened with a fever and would have had me come down today. Will therefore wait till I hear farther, especially as I intended at any rate to be down next week.'

Tuesday, November 13—Wednesday, November 28 On the first of these days got a letter from Philip which it was great security and carelessness in me not to have sent for the night before, advertising that the doctor look'd on Nancy Waite as in great hazard on the Monday morning. The letter was to (my sister) Nancy, as Philip had taken it for granted that I had set out for Berwick on the morning of that day. Set out on the Tuesday in less than 2 hours after the letter came to my hand, and got to Berwick betwixt 5 and 6 o'clock. By this time the poor child had all the fatal symptoms and was indeed little better than in the agonies of death. Tho' the eruption of red spots which was very copious kept out, and preserved its red colour to the last, yet from the Munday morning her pulse had fallen and her respiration became laborious and difficult by ulcerations, as the doctors believed, in her throat, an usual attendant of these fevers. A blister applied on the Tuesday forenoon was taken away after I came. Tho' very strong, it scarce had produced any effect, but an excoriation of a livid colour. . . . The sweet little innocent at last expired betwixt 7 and 8 in the morning of Wednesday the 14th, at the age of 8 years.

I performed all the duty to her I could, by sitting up all the night with her, and from time to time administering to her some little draughts, part of which she with great efforts got over, till within a few hours of her death. She knew me and looked on me often with pleasure; attempted also to speak to me, but could not articulate the words. She caught the infection, it is probable, at school, such a fever having been very general among the young ones, tho' mortal but to a small number. This scene of distress was scarce over, when we learned that the poor boy had had feverish symptoms the preceding night, which continued still with him, tho' gently, in the morning. The Doctor took a sufficient quantity of blood from him; and as grief at first for the other poor child, and afterwards a sore throat and other distressing symptoms, the consequences of grief and of the cold and fatigue in attending poor Nancy, rendered my sister quite incapable of attending the boy, I set about this task and shall be always thankful to the Almighty for having been an instrument, if I am not mistaken, of preserving his life, which was certainly in no small danger both from the violence of the disease itself and from some circumstances that fell out in the progress of it. The symptoms, however, as all who had seen them both affirmed, were not near so violent as those of his sister. The eruption on him was not in distinct spots, but a great redness in various places of his body, particularly his hands, feet and lower part of his belly, which in a few days became very itchy, and at last peeled in white scales. In the beginning he was greatly inclined to sleep and dozed much. His tongue was parched and white. On the fourth day he complained of his throat, his pulse growing very high and quick. I immediately advertised his doctors and a poultice was applied, wherein the bigness of a walnut of theriaca was mixed, and this for two days was renewed twice or thrice in the day. It seemed to have a good effect, for neither his swallowing nor respiration was ever very sensibly obstructed. A viscid defluxion in his nose and throat made him breathe with noise and snoring; but he gradually and pretty soon got free of it. His urine separated and

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he was much relieved on the morning of the 7th day. His respiration and swallowing continued perfectly easy, but his urine ceased to subside or separate, and a great heat and quick pulse still continued. . . . On the 12th, 13th, 14th however, his heat sensibly abated, and the swelling of his legs and feet fell. Their pain also on being touched and great heat, diminished. . . . That forenoon (15th) I left him, and he seemed to be almost well; he got up, had taken his breakfast and was amusing himself. For 6 or 7 nights I lay in a shakedown in the room beside him, and had too often occasion to see how much the ordinary watchers on these occasions stand in need of an Intendant. One night (Sunday, November 18) I thought him in extreme danger. . . . He continued still to dose, and I heard him with great pain and anxiety labouring greatly in his respiration, and, as I apprehended, very likely soon to breathe his last; while his two other attendants were fast asleep. I at last resolved to awake him, and when I came to his bed, found his pulse low and slow to a great degree, and saw the drops of sweat standing on his face. I awakened him gently and in that extremity could think of nothing so proper as to give him some pure wine, of which I warmed a teacupfull and sweetened it a little. I found him still sensible, tho' greatly feeble; and by the vehement persuasion of a man almost in despair, prevailed with him to swallow a little of it, which as soon as he had done, gave him so agreeable a relief that without further difficulty he sipped out the whole tea-cupfull. This revived him, and care was taken the rest of the morning not to allow him to want too long. He was also in hazard that same night of catching a very dangerous cold, for the poultices being discontinued, as no longer necessary, a wrapping of wool enclosed in linnen had been applied in the evening to his throat, which by his struggling and restlessness, through the working of the glyster, had become quite loose and detached, and thereby his throat bared, after having been kept so warm before, which, if not speedily remedied, might have had fatal consequences. This was the sorest and most distressing night of my attendance—it was the night of Sunday the 18th—but at the same time, I believe, the most useful. The others, however, were sufficiently restless; and as such a strict attendance became unnecessary, I came down to the parlour where a tent bed had been set up. . . . He took on this occasion a good deal of chicken broth with barley, which seemed to restore him much, and after this he sensibly gained ground. At the beginning he took a few spoonfuls of a cordial mixture with the neutral salts, and drops of Elixir Vitrioli among some of his drinks. But his chief and almost only medicine was wine, first of a softer and heavier kind, which he took in whey, afterwards sherry, light and of a good body, which he took with water, which at first seemed to do great good to his mouth and throat, and afterwards proved an excellent cordial. It was indeed his chief support; for he took very little food either solid or liquid. One night towards the end of the distemper he drank a good deal of barley gruel boiled with raisins, which seemed to do him good. He took also some currant jelly, which seemed to cool and refresh him much; but he soon tired of it. A great additional distress to Mr. Waite's family was one of his prentices, a very stout lad of 19 falling into a fever just after the poor child's burial, of which he died.

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